an important discussion of “gendered subalternity” within the modern culture of western Europe, on many levels relevant to the debate over multiculturalism in comparative literature.

14. Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994), 5–6. All further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated LC.


MUST WE APOLOGIZE?

PETER BROOKS

Although I hold a Ph.D. in comparative literature, I have never been sure I deserved it, since I’ve never been sure what the field, or the discipline, is and never sure that I could really claim to be teaching it or working in it. I was trained at a time when comparative literature was ceasing to be what the Sorbonne long believed it to be, the study of sources, influences, literary schools, and “movements”—the ideal Sorbonne CompLit thesis was easily parodied as Madame de Stael en Roumanie: the definitive study of a French writer’s export to a definable foreign market, though of course it allowed of such as Goethe en France as well. Comparative literature in America in the 1960s knew it was no longer that but didn’t know quite what it was, other than a place of greater literary cosmopolitanism than departments of English or French or American studies: a place where faculty and students aspired to a certain cultural self-alienation, a wider contextualization, a poetic Euro-chic.

A persistent piece of graduate student lore at Harvard in the early 1960s concerned the dream of a student in comparative literature on the eve of his oral exams. The doorbell rang, the student stumbled from bed, opened the door, and found himself faced with Harry Levin and Renato Poggioli (the two professors in the department) dressed as plumbers, carrying pipe wrenches and acetylene torches, who announced: “We’ve come to compare the literature.” The dream became proverbial no doubt because of the anxiety associated with that notion of “comparing the literature” and the problem of what it could possibly mean. I imagine that many young comparatists were asked, as I was, by well-meaning laypersons: “Well, what do you compare?” The answer, I recall, began with a mumbled admission that you didn’t really
compare anything. You simply worked in more than one literature, studying literature without regard to national boundaries and definitions.¹

I think I began to rid myself of some of my own anxieties about the undisciplined discipline I had stumbled into only when I managed to stop worrying about "comparing the literature," about that adjective comparative. The name of the game seemed to have been formed on the model of other nineteenth-century usages such as "comparative anatomy" or "comparative linguistics," in a kind of pseudoscientific claim that there was a comparative method that could be universally applied, to the production of acceptable results. Surely this was the wrong model. We weren't "comparing literature." But what, then, were we doing?

Cure from anxiety continued with the founding, in the early 1970s at Yale, of The Literature Major, an undergraduate program created independently of the graduate program in comparative literature (which had no interest in taking on undergraduate instruction), somewhat under the impact of European structuralism. In proudly claiming the chaste, adjectiveless title of "Literature," we were staking a claim to study and teach literariness and the literary phenomenon, broadly conceived. The introductory course to the major, entitled (in pre—gender—unbiased usage) "Man and His Fictions," took its stand on the etymological sense of fiction, from fingers, both "to make," as in the verbal artifact, and "to make up," as in "to feign." We were interested both in the making of texts—in the way that the Russian Formalists had brought to our attention—and in the intentionality of fictions of all sorts, from daydreaming through riddles, folk tales, detective stories, advertising, to poetry. We allied ourselves with the quasi—anthropological spirit of early French structuralism: while analyzing instances of fictions, from both high art and popular culture, we wanted to ask what human purposes they served, how they defined the place of the human maker of sense—bearing sign systems, indeed how fiction making was an essential characteristic of the human.²

Ridding oneself of the adjective comparative was liberating and permitted me largely to ignore what was going on in the comparative literature establishment (and I confess that my membership in the ACLA was only brief, since it seemed to me a relatively misguided and futile organization). Yet the liberation was only temporary, since eventually I was invited to join the graduate program in comparative literature, and later it and The Literature Major combined into one department, with both graduate and undergraduate programs, and since in any event comparative literature remains the rubric that identifies, to students and deans, and in course catalogues, that still only vaguely defined enterprise from which I earn a paycheck. I recall that when Paul de Man was chair of the Department of Comparative Literature, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and feeling some exasperation with the opposition of some colleagues to the kind of redefinition of the curriculum he favored, he once suggested that we might start a breakaway department, labeled "Poetics, Rhetoric, and the History of Literature." The unifying center of literary study for de Man was of course "theory," though this notion was for him complex because of the difficult relations it entertained to "reading."³ If the object of the discourse on literature was "literariness," this was by no means (as the Russian Formalists seemed to believe) inherent in the poetic "function" of language but rather something always to be defined in an act of reading which always both postulated and undid its subtending theory.

"Poetics, Rhetoric, and the History of Literature" seems about as good a characterization of what I think my own Department of Comparative Literature teaches as one is apt to come up with, though it leaves a number of questions in suspense. It does, though, provide some background to both my comfort and discomfort with the 1993 ACLA report, "Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century." I welcome the report's call for opening up broader interpretive contexts for the study of literature, and for moving out from the traditional Eurocentric definition of the field. In fact, much of the recommended opening of the field has already occurred in many departments: languages other than European are welcomed; the crossings of borders into anthropology, social history, philosophy, psychoanalysis have become routine; feminism, film studies, queer theory have contested and broadened the canon. When I look at the dissertations currently under way in our department, it's clear that a broad eclecticism has taken the place of what at one point had become rather too narrow a commitment to rhetorical reading of the deconstructive variety.

Yet my unease with the report is real. I am distressed by its abjectly apologetic tone when discussing the teaching of literature. To be told that literature is only "one discursive practice among many others," that "comparative literature departments should moderate their focus on high—literary discourse and examine the entire discursive context in which texts are created and such heights are constructed," that the "production of literature" as an object of study could thus be compared to the production of music, philosophy, history, or law as similar discursive systems" creates the impression that the study of literature is an outmoded mandarin practice that had better catch up with the hip world of cultural studies. The impression is confirmed in the
next paragraph of the report, where we are told that “textually precise read-
ing should take account as well of the ideological, cultural, and institutional
contexts in which their meanings are produced.”

One wonders, first of all, where all those “shoulds” come from (the report
is full of them). In the name of what are we being asked to consider literature
as “one discursive practice among many others” and to “moderate” our focus
on “high” literature? Is it certain, on the one hand, that these recommenda-
tions are not already in effect—possibly excessively so in some programs—
and, on the other hand, that one speaks from any convincing basis in making
them? For what is above all lacking in the report is any theory of the practices
recommended. If it wants comparative literature departments to give up
whatever forms of the teaching of literature are currently practiced in favor
of ideological and cultural contextualizations and the study of literary produc-
tion, let us at least have some reference to how that can be done. The problem
here may be that cultural studies has yet to produce a coherent body of theory.
This may be why the report contents itself with tired clichés where we want
energizing definitions. When we learn that we “should” engage in “reflection
on the privileged strategies of meaning making in each discipline,” that we
“should be actively engaged in the comparative study of canon formation and
in reconceiving the canon,” that our departments “should play an active role
in furthering the multicultural recontextualization of Anglo-American and
European perspectives,” all we’ve been given is a list of some of the common
topics discussed at MLA conventions for the last decade. What does it all
mean, in what construction of textuality, of the university, of the world should
we be responding to these imperatives? What kind of imperatives are they:
intellectual, pedagogical, institutional, ethical? And isn’t the rhetoric of virtue
implicit in such imperatives quite at odds with the cultural relativism, the
situatedness of analytical perspective, preached in the report?

While the report eventually gets around to noting: “All of the above
suggests the importance of theoretically informed thinking to comparative
literature as a discipline,” one senses that it really hasn’t much use for theory,
that it places its faith exclusively in a progressive ideology and in the cumula-
tive outcomes of the practices it recommends. Now, to downgrade the study
of literature and those forms of attention and knowledge which it has tradi-
tionally implicated—including rhetoric and poetics—in favor of something
as undefined and unsupported as the cultural studies alluded to here strikes
me as being borderline suicidal. It risks replacing the study of literature with
amateur social history, amateur sociology, and personal ideology.

I have worked myself into the position of claiming that professors of
(comparative) literature do have something to teach. Northrop Frye, in his
“Polemical Introduction” to Anatomy of Criticism, argued that one should be
able to write a primer of the elements of literary criticism and to demonstrate
that the mental process involved in literary study “is as coherent and progress-
sive as the study of science.” The claim is no doubt exaggerated and, thirty-
five years later, the primer still unwritten. But the point has a general validity.

As teachers of literature, we do call on a body of lore by which we apprentice
our students to more competent reading of literature. The study of literature
is not in itself the acquisition of information, but it involves that: the informa-
tion implied by poetics, rhetoric, and literary history. Poetics, especially—
the understanding of genres, of conventions, of the way a sonnet makes its argu-
ment, for instance, or of the “rules” of neoclassical tragedy—represents an
indispensable kind of lore for understanding, not the meanings of specific
texts, but the processes by which meaning is made, the grounds for
interpretation.

“Learning literature” still works, I think, according to the ancient, un-
scientific, time-consuming process of apprenticeship: learning one’s trade at
the bench of the master craftsman. But it is not merely learning to manufac-
ture single items: there is a generalizability to the process, precisely in the lore
of poetics. I have recently argued elsewhere that Anglo-American literary
studies, from New Criticism to deconstruction, have perhaps been too exclu-
sively concerned with exegesis, with the interpretation of individual texts.
While exegesis can be contextualized in many different ways, the most imper-
ative context is that of poetics. Students need to consider, for instance, that
while Madame Bovary may be illuminated by comparison to Briquet’s and
Brachet’s medical treatises on hysteria, a novel proceeds according to certain
conventions, certain low-level rules of meaning creation, and that reading a
novel is not quite the same as reading a medical treatise. The point is obvious,
but one is aware of academic studies that put the difference of genres and
discourses at naught.

In the call for contextualizing literature by way of “ideological, cultural,
and institutional contexts,” it is helpful to remember that literature itself is an
institution.7 It has probably always been an institution; certainly it self-
consciously became one in Renaissance Europe. And this means, among other
things, that writers are always responding, not only to ideological and cultural
contexts, but as well to the history and situation of the literature in which they
want to claim to be participants. An aspiring poet becomes an aspiring poet
because he or she has read some poetry by others, not simply because he or
she wants to respond to the ideological and cultural Zeitgeist. I don’t, in fact,
see that anyone could become a poet without having read prior poetry: the case simply doesn't make sense. And while the formal constraints of novel or essay may be looser, one still can't imagine the aspiration to write in a genre without some absorption of its previous examples. The origin of Montaigne's Essais in a selection of citations from classical authors remains exemplary of literary apprenticeship—as does parody, and imitation of all sorts.

The institutional history of literature is a real context for literary creation and susceptible of creative revision, as the powerful work of Harold Bloom, from the Anxiety of Influence onward, has so well demonstrated. To neglect the literary institution as context in exclusive favor of other contexts—often more overtly ideological and political—is to fail to perform a necessary act of mediation, one that recognizes that if "literariness" is not, as Jakobson and others claimed, in the nature of the literary usage of language, it is nonetheless part of the stance of literature in the world, part of its project, part of its institutional claim. Even the Supreme Court of the United States has understood this, in its recent decision that literary parody is not the same thing as the infringement of copyright.8

My argument, then, is that teaching literature as literature and not as something else—not as "one discursive practice among many others"—remains necessary if we are to apprentice our students to "learning literature." And it remains what we, as a professional caste, know how to teach. This is not to say that we should not cross all the borders we find confining, into whatever domains we find potentially illuminating (in my own work with psychoanalysis, I have tried to do that). It is rather to say that studying literature, as a form of attention, as a reading competence, needs to remain in focus. Here, it is perhaps worth a polemical caveat against a bland "interdisciplinarity," of the type so often touted by deans. Real interdisciplinarity doesn't come from mixing together a bit of this and that, putting philosophy and pedology and literature into a Cuisineart. It comes when thought processes reach the point where the disciplinary boundary one comes up against no longer makes sense—when the internal logic of thinking impels a transgression of boundaries. And to the extent that this is teachable at all, it requires considerable apprenticeship in the discipline that is to be transcended.

So far, what I have said seems to apply to the teaching of any form of literary studies, in a French or English department, for instance. What is specific to comparative literature—or is it condemned to be a space of the undefinable? I think the answer to this question is implicit in what I have said so far: comparative literature might best conceive of itself as that place that provides the most probing and self-conscious reflection on what it means to study literature. It could be—and it often is—the place where poetics, rhetoric, and the history of literature are most closely attended to. It could be—and often is—the department where "theory" receives the greatest attention. Theory is in this understanding both what comparative literature can do better than other departments because it is open to and competent in theoretical work produced in other languages and cultures, and what holds the diverse endeavors of comparatists together. Theory is the lingua franca of comparative literature departments, sometimes the only one as students pursue more and more diverse work in cultures that don't necessarily find their center of gravity in the Latin West. The argument for the centrality of theory is not an attempt to impose one central theory. It is rather an argument for self-consciousness and self-reflexivity about what literature may be and what it may mean to study it. The opportunity, and the burden, of comparative literature lies partly in the fact that it cannot take refuge in national traditions and their definitions of the features pertinent to construct literary theory and history, that it must always find them not good enough. The centrality of theory to comparative literature does not in itself argue against the "cultural studies" model implicitly favored in the ACLA report, and in fact the incorporation of the cultural studies impulse within comparative literature departments seems to be under way in many institutions. The question in some institutions at present appears to be whether comparative literature ingests cultural studies or rather gets swallowed by it. Devourment in either direction would seem to me a mistake. I would prefer to think of comparative literature as providing a viable interlocutor to cultural studies, one that insists that contextualizations of literature in ideological and cultural terms remain aware of literature's institutional definitions and of the uses of poetics and rhetoric in understanding the ways in which literature creates meanings that both resemble and differ from those produced in other discourses.

As Michael Riffaterre elegantly argues in his essay for this volume, if cultural studies urge us ever to contextualize, literary studies also of necessity include a moment of decontextualization, "for a text can be said to be literary when it survives the extinction of the issues, the vanishing of the causes, and the memory of the circumstances to which that text responded." To say this need not entail the isolation of "high art" on a pedestal. It argues rather that the study of literature always involves a special form of attention to the structure and texture of the text which is often elided in other forms of cultural analysis. I have yet to be convinced that most practitioners of cultural studies are readers, in the strong sense inculcated by all the viable movements in literary study of our time, from New Criticism to poststructuralism.
Far from believing with the ACLA report that "the term 'literature' may no longer adequately describe our object of study," I would hence urge that literature must very much remain our focus, while by no means restricting its dialogic interaction with other discourses and its various contexts. When one thinks about the institutional future of comparative literature as a field of study, one feel that its strength is allied to its vulnerability. The extent to which it refuses definition, the extent to which it conceives itself as the center of intersecting discourses about literature, and the place of the theory of these discourses, makes it tempting for many, both inside and outside the field, to conceive it as a kind of omnium-gatherum of those humanities subjects and practices that have no other home. Thus university administrators have often found comparative literature a flag of convenience for small and homeless subjects, from marginalized languages to odd bits of theory. Or else they've wanted to submerge comparative literature in some larger interdisciplinary entity. It is not to retreat to older definitions of comparative literature to argue that our field needs to maintain some sense of identity, not perhaps as a discipline, but as a place for the very conceptualization of discipline as it is pertinent to literary study.

In more concrete terms, I believe that comparative literature at the moment finds its specificity and its raison d'être in an ever-renewed and multifaceted address to the question, What is literature, and what does it mean to study literature? This question cannot always be explicit in our teaching, to be sure, but I am convinced it ought never to be far away, always ready to resurface. Two years ago, I took on the teaching of the required introductory seminar for first-year graduate students in comparative literature in our department. This was a course inaugurated by René Wellek in the late 1940s (Wellek was the first professor of comparative literature at Yale, appointed in 1947) and for many years the crucial initiation of some of the most notable comparatists produced on native ground. Recently, the course had fallen into decadence, no doubt for the lack of someone with Wellek's range of knowledge and capacity for encyclopaedic organization, but also because the proliferation of critical schools and isms had made it difficult to perform any sort of magisterial compass of criticism and theory. I decided to reorganize the seminar under the title "Education and Cultural Transmission," focusing especially on the place of literature and its teaching in cultural debates and cultural institutions, including, in the final weeks of the seminar, the recent history of literary studies at Yale. The value of the seminar, for all its—and my own—limitations, came from the opportunity it gave students to think and talk about the strange enterprise of teaching literature.

For it is a strange enterprise, one that is never wholly comfortable in the university. We teachers of literature have little hard information to impart, we're not even sure what we teach, and we have something of a bad conscience about the whole business, which in part explains why some among us find a relieved refuge in the rhetoric of virtue which sometimes comes with cultural studies, in the conviction that one is demasking pernicious dominant ideologies and promoting a brave new multiculturalist millennium. I am not opposed to virtue, but I am convinced that the pedagogical practice of it must begin with our insistence that students learn to read, that they apprentice themselves to the difficult task of encountering textuality, that they try to understand that whatever contexts may be used to "explain" literature, they never entirely explain. Literature needs to remain a challenge to other forms of discourse with which it is in dialogue. And the teaching of literature needs to insist that it is a different form of attention from that practiced in any other field in the university.

I think there is much truth in Terry Eagleton's recent assertion—in his inaugural address as Wharton Professor of English at Oxford—that literary and cultural studies have become a battleground, within the university and without, in part because they have taken up vital questions that other disciplines, in their professionalization, have for the moment abandoned. Writes Eagleton: "For the great speculative questions of truth and justice, of freedom and happiness, to have found a home somewhere; and if an aridly technical philosophy, or a drearily positivist sociology, are no hospitable media for such explorations, then they will be displaced onto a criticism which is simply not intellectually equipped to take this strain." Ill equipped, to be sure, but as Eagleton also notes, great moments of literary criticism tend to be those when, speaking of literature, criticism is speaking of that and more, "mapping the deep structures and central directions of an entire culture." It is in my view a good thing that literary criticism be under strain, so long as it recognizes the limits of what it can do, so long as it continues to deal with that strain, those tensions, in strong acts of reading. The response to strain need not be the abandonment of its central enterprise but rather the affirmation of that centrality.

For the teacher of literature, I seem to have worked myself around to some form of the advice famously given by Benjamin Disraeli to aspiring statesmen: "Never apologize, never explain." This, of course, is not quite right. We need constantly to explain the strange fact that poetry gained a place in the academic republic (one it didn't always have, one that many still find unwarranted) and that studying literature is a fundamentally different experi-
ence from any other in the curriculum. It cannot be reduced to cultural studies because it is fundamentally other, resisting full contextualization in other discourses, demanding different forms of attention, even of knowing. But apologies are not in order.

Notes

1. Checking references for the notes to this essay, I discovered that the Dream of the Plumbers had been recorded by Harry Levin himself, in “Comparing the Literature,” in *Grounds for Comparison* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 75–76. Levin’s version attributes the dream to the wife of a graduate student, an interesting displacement of anxiety.

2. On the original conception of the program, see my article “Man and His Fictions: One Approach to the Teaching of Literature,” *College English* 35, no. 1 (1973): 40–49.


4. I cite from a Report to the ACLA: Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century (1993).


8. See *Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music, Inc.* 62 LW 4169. Justice Souter delivered the opinion of the Court, which clearly recognizes (though it does not use the word) the importance of “intertextuality” in the creation of a work that cites but transforms the original.


If “literature” alone constituted the discipline of comparative literature, then we would have to ask why there ought to be “comparative” literature at all—why don’t we simply have national literature departments? It seems to me that the “comparative” in comparative literature is equally, if not more, crucial a factor in considering the future of comparative literature: exactly what constitutes “comparison”—what kinds of relations, critical formations, analytical perspectives are relevant? More than the word literature, it is the interest in “comparative” which has allowed the practitioners of comparative literature to distinguish their work from that done within strictly national and national-linguistic boundaries and to say, with some rigor, that comparative literature is not simply a matter of adding/juxtaposing one national literature to another so that its existence is simply—as many of comparative literature’s hostile opponents in national literature departments would charge—redundant and superficial.

I am entitling my response to the 1993 Report on Standards by the ACLA committee “In the Name of Comparative Literature” in order to highlight a couple of preliminary considerations. First is the fact that, in a manner beyond the control of those who have strong feelings about what comparative literature is and is not, all kinds of claims are being made and all kinds of practices flourish in its name. ComplLit in this first instance signals prestige, cosmopolitism, and power—besides having the respectability of a long-established discipline, it is also a kind of “classy” designer label, like Armani, Dior, Givenchy, St. Laurent, and so forth, which many want to display. Second, however, precisely because comparative literature is simply a name, it must be subject to change. As a name and as a discipline, comparative litera-